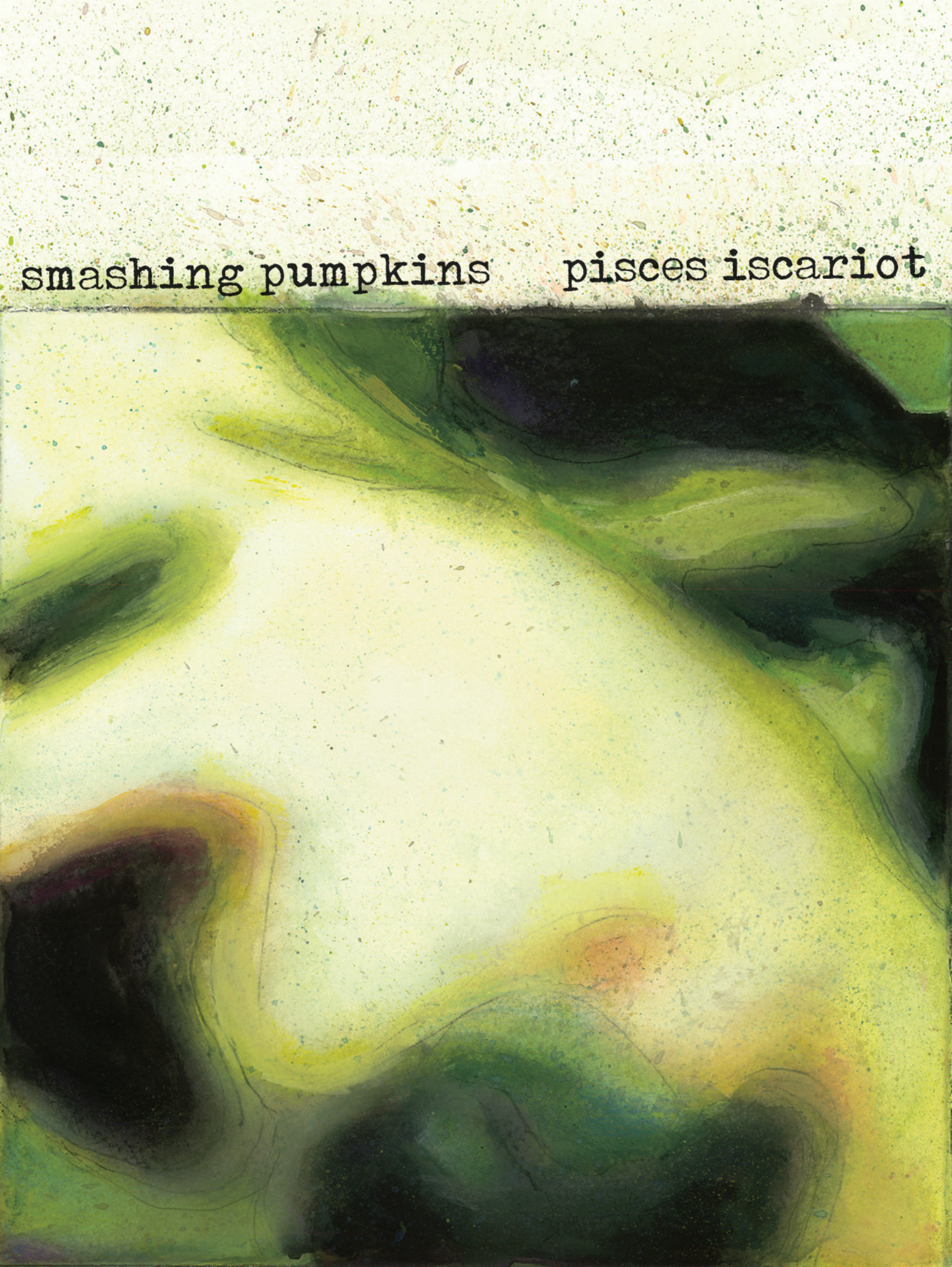
smashing pumpkins
pisces iscariot

PISCES ISCARIOT: SCENES FROM A LANDSLIDE SUCCESS
By David Wild

Pisces Iscariot was the little mix tape that went platinum. Quickly.

This unlikely smash album that some came to mistake for the Pumpkins' third studio effort even yielded a hit single – another wonderfully odd moment in the landslide that was the intense early success story of Smashing Pumpkins.

The original edition of this release began with a phone call to Billy Corgan from Mark Williams, the band's A&R representative from Virgin. "My memory is that he called and asked, 'How do you feel about putting out a compilation of some of your extra tracks?' I can't remember which band of our peerage had just done something similar, but being competitive I was like "Yeah, sure." When I started sequencing it, at first I thought, 'Oh no' because I wondered if this was going to come off as just a lukewarm collection of songs; or as we used to call collections like this – Songs Not Good Enough To Go On The Album."

In retrospect, Corgan feels quite differently, and not just because the public ended up embracing *Pisces Iscariot* in a much bigger way than he imagined. "What's weird with us was that between my ambition and all the pressure on us to actually succeed, we kind of blunted the edges of what we were in many ways better at," Corgan says now. "And I think there are songs on *Pisces* that really capture the band that we were without all the pressure – which a lot of people genuinely liked. But truthfully, that band could not have been as successful. So it was like we were constantly being drawn into bigger concepts and bigger reaches, and so of course something always kind of got knocked aside. But there are songs on this collection that are really beautiful and in many ways really should have been on albums. Yet in the end, they just didn't fit whatever theme I had going on at the time."
Pisces Iscariot documents a time when the Pumpkins were rising to remarkable heights and Corgan was extraordinarily prolific as a writer. "What I hear when I listen back is the joy of the exploration and the discovery," says Corgan. "There was still a lot of uncharted territory then that I would cover later. But I think you can hear me going, "Wow, maybe I can do Fleetwood Mac 1975 – and in that one case, I literally did it, but I think you hear me experimenting with all sorts of sounds and approaches and being pleasantly surprised that we could actually pull them off."

Asked how long it took him to sequence *Pisces Iscariot*, Billy Corgan says, "I have honestly no memory of it, but the flow was very important, so I would have worked on it like a baseball lineup – because you want to hide your weaknesses. My approach was to look at the album like a mix tape. It was as if I was going to make a mix tape for a friend to say, 'Hey, check out this other stuff I did with my band that's not on the albums.' I didn't feel as if it had to work as a great album, but it had to work as a good mix tape. It always impressed me when people would make you a mix tape and it would have a real flow, and be able to go from like a great Black Sabbath track to say like a Tom Waits song. I was always impressed by my friends who could do that well."

Corgan recalls that the job of putting *Pisces Iscariot* together was "kind of put into my lap. The mood from the rest of the band was basically, 'Whatever, you deal with it.' Honestly it was all just a mad scramble to get the album together then. A few songs had to be properly mixed – and a few things had to be finished. I just did whatever needed to be done. For instance, the version of "Hello Kitty Cat" from the *Siamese Dream* sessions that was mixed by Alan Moulder and Butch Vig wasn't bad, but I'd call up and say to Butch 'we're gonna have to remix that one.' There was a lot of that detail work to be done and not a lot of room in which to do it to hit the deadline."

And yet, even with limited time, *Pisces Iscariot* would turn out beautifully and prove to be bigger than anyone imagined. The song that helped bring *Pisces Iscariot* was a cover of "Landslide," the early Fleetwood Mac classic written and sung by Stevie Nicks.

"I just thought that "Landslide" was one of the most beautiful songs ever," Corgan explains. "For me, the song was always about that transition from child to adult. That's just my take on it. And the cool thing was that doing the song led to me getting to know Stevie, and almost working with her too. So that was a pretty great experience. What's weird is that I don't think we ever took any guff for covering Fleetwood Mac, and we took a lot for so much shit that we did do. I do remember people giving some grief about us covering Depeche Mode, and I had to say, "Because they're awesome." But I don't remember ever hearing an unkind word about "Landslide" – other than from the rude chick from the Dixie Chicks, who said our version was no good on national TV – when they put out their version, which they said had nothing to do with ours – which just so happened to be a big hit the year before. But hey, her big mouth got her in plenty of trouble after that anyway."

A live cover included on *Pisces Iscariot* was another standout track – "Girl Named Sandoz" by The Animals. "That song was actually on an Animals collection I had a really good vinyl version of. I knew Chas Chandler, the bass player from the Animals who went on to manage Jimi Hendrix, and if you listen to "A Girl Named Sandoz," it's obvious Eric Burdon and the band are going, 'We've got to get with this Hendrix thing.' It's such a fun LSD song from when LSD was legal – Sandoz was the name of company making the acid I believe. And in my twisted mentality, the Pumpkins doing the Animals doing Hendrix seemed somehow fun and appropriate."

Yet ultimately, it's the originals included on *Pisces Iscariot* that impress the most. The stunning and expansive "Starla" is a gem that Corgan says "was caught between the cracks of *Gish* and *Siamese Dream*. I think we were stuck for a B-side to one of the *Gish* singles, and thought, let's just record this. In hindsight, I think it's one of the coolest things we ever did, but I don't know if I'd say it's one of the best. I think it stands up there as one of those songs that's sort of risen above the times for whatever reason. It's one of those rare, basically one chord songs that really works."

Asked about this writer's favorite song on the album, "Whir," Corgan recalls, "Some stations started playing that one almost like it was going to be a follow-up hit to "Landslide." "Whir" never really caught on, but to me that's a beautiful song that kind of got pushed aside because of me being so obsessed with heavy metal and louder things. It's also got that cool Led Zeppelin *Physical Graffiti* ending. I took it seriously, but not too seriously – which is nice in retrospect." Meanwhile, Corgan says that in reflection "La Dolly Vita" is "probably the first really good pretty song I wrote, foreshadowing the other 'girl songs' to come." The album also features the first James Iha solo composition to appear on a Pumpkins album. "If I had to pick my favorite song of his, it would be "Blew Away." I think on that song, James captures a part of his innocence that I really liked. That reminds me of the James Iha who I first met, and it's probably the purest statement of who he was as a writer then."

As for the album's memorable title, Corgan recalls, "I believe my thinking was that I'm a Pisces – that's a big part of my personal architecture. And I sort of saw myself as betraying my spiritual destiny. It's been suggested that it had something to do with Kurt Cobain's suicide – which it did not at all. But that's the creepy world we live in that people thought that. I was referring to myself. At that time, I felt very much caught between who I was and who I was supposed to be and who I needed to be. Now, I think the title is funny. That's one of the things that people often missed – that the band and I all had a very dry, very Midwestern sense of humor. People were like, 'You realize those two words don't really go together, don't you?' And I was like, 'Yeah, well they do now.'"

Corgan's hands-on approach extended to taking the photograph for the cover of *Pisces Iscariot*. "I was just jerking around trying to make blurry pictures," he remembers. "At the time, there was a lot of 'Hurry, Hurry' and it fell on me to make it happen. I saw it as sort of an art project. That was my wife on the cover. I have a lot of outtakes of those images that reveal the subjects more clearly. I believe I had a Polaroid and if you shot too close, it couldn't focus right. That was my wife on the front cover – I can tell you that."

When *Pisces Iscariot* was released in 1994, there was no doubt that fans of the band felt good about the compilation. "First of all, I was shocked that some people saw it as a new album release. People were like, "I love your third album." And I was like, 'Oh fuck, no.' But then I was even more shocked when the album really sold. I imagined it would be a little B-side collection, then we'd move on very quickly. It was very weird because *Pisces Iscariot* quickly went platinum and yielded a legitimate hit song." The album hit #4 on the Billboard 200, and "Landslide" reached #3 on Modern Rock Tracks chart. "It was all pretty strange for our little mix tape that we didn't do anything to promote – no videos, no interviews, nothing. "Landslide" became a big single and the label didn't even commission a video. I didn't necessarily want them to, but they certainly didn't ask. And despite the lack of promotion, it kept selling. We didn't see that coming, but then again, we didn't see a lot coming around that time."

soothe- i woke up on this one and headed straight for my guitar, writing and recording it down the moment it was done. part of the reason this snapshot works for me is it is the rare song ~~xx~~captured at the moment of conception, and not in its far later, intellectually altered simulacra. i was sharing an apartment at this time with an unrepentant hippie, who liked his krautrock in the mornings after we'd tripped the night. perhaps this is a reaction to the way he liked to come back down? frail and bedazzled- the odd song that got the hammer between gish dynamism and siamese dreaming, losing out in a sorry race against time. this particular one lingered on the edges while we were writing our second album in the garage park, never being able to break free of the feeling among us that it was somehow from the past just past (listen people, there's one or two in every bunch). i remember jc hating the duh-duh-duh kick drum at the start of the second verse, and then it got kicked itself to the curb duh-duh-duh only to be picked up per necessity; the arguments about its worth long faded away. plume- james st. james brought this one over to the apartment, and i loved the cosmic blues in it right away. we did a little demo, and set it aside for what would one day be the pile for siamese dream. but then we got a call saying ominously "umm, can you guys ~~xxxx~~ crank out two b-sides for a uk single in the next few days." this and starla were close enough to being ready that we sacrif iced 'em both, writing the lyrics at the studio the day they were recorded. features one of my favorite lines i've ever written, "my boredom has outshined the sun" and a true line at that. whir- i must say that butch never saw much in this one, sorta-kinda got that 'head scratchy' look on his face whenever i'd tea up a soft ballad. possibly the strongest song on this collection, it gets overlooked for being too nice or not nice enough. we played this a lot in practice at the time, the highlight from my vantage point being the exquisite brushwork on the snare. a wispy kind of bow to the innocence i was watching leave, as quickly as i could document the extinction of my youth.

blew away- a tune that perfectly captures the james iha that i met in 1987, long before he too was swallowed under the great big wave of an assumed success. i will say had little to do with this song beyond arranging it, being gratefully left out of the recording process for once. starry-eyed and ~~xxxxxxx~~ countrified, this is a strong effort for a lazy eye. pissant- whilst chopping away at siamese dream, the tedium in such faithful repetition had started to drive me mad; so mad that i begged for a different, rougher kind of work. jc and i wanted to record this version knowing it had no chance of making the record, but butch rightly said "boys, there's just no time!" so i made a promise and a bet to him, daring that we could f inish recording the song top to bottom in 3 hours flat. "impossible" butch said, but we did it in exactly 2 hours and 59 minutes. for those keeping score the drums were recorded through the mayo guitar pickup run through a big muff; as punk as we'd ever get-got blah. hello kitty kat- designed for the siamese dream album, this song was cut at the last moment; suffering as it was from a mix too clear and impoverished poor rock execution. in my quest to find heavier odes, i'd pushed this one through until finally coming to my senses in the final hour. once it was slated for pisces, a new mix was commissioned, where butch and i cranked it through a board so hard it gets an alpha gleam that at least comes near to what i'd originally aimed for. the kitty in this kat was meant as a weak pun on all things pussycat related. meow. obscured- a tune i'd had high, high hopes for; written in the 'tide out' period after the release of gish, where new ideas were lightly explored and just as easily discarded. a favorite in my canon of doe-eyed come-ons, obscured does express some deeply rooted beliefs i formed during my late teen years, standing as i was on corners at midnight praying for a gothic rescue. i remember playing this in demo stage to a picky female who remarked in abject confusion, "what is this i'm listening to?" to those types of questions i would answer "just because."
landslide- needing a song for a bbc session, i sought out one that was familiar to me yet unknown, falling in love with the original

fleetwood mac version as written by stevie nicks. bbc sessions were booked then as 4 hour ordeals where you would be expected to crank out your 4 numbers lickety-split; and not for heaven's sake go a minute over. heavy pressures and vibes were placed on the sessions always to hurry, hurry, so by the time i got around to recording this i had only 20 min left. i had learned the guitar part from the record, having no idea that the original was capo'd up, and so to accommodate i tuned the guitar all funny. i did the XXXXX rhythm in one take, playing a solo without knowing what key the song is to the track barren with vocal. i sang two takes, listening back in the control room and summarily declaring 'use the front half of take one, and the second half of take two' before walking out the door on the hour. i was shocked when this song became a hit, a success not supported by a video, and further amazed when it landed me an audience with stevie; who sang next to me in her home as we sat at the piano. starla- this is the stuff legends are made of, recorded in one all-night-go to make a hard deadline. much has been made of this nothing song, but it's the right kind of nothing; where you see that once in a while i am capable of getting out of the way of a good idea that needs space. a cataclysmic solo follows the nursery rhyme into the cosmos, crashing out whatever is left of your purple heart. blue- i didn't want to put this song on pisces, for i had soured on it in the years that followed its release; seeing it as too overt and lacking in pure raw desire. but i did secretly love the quiet bits which in the end helped me to justify its inclusion here beyond needing 'one more' to make it all work. this song at its best was an acoustic song, but having been recorded for gish, it was adapted to a heavier XXX frame which the churlish melody couldn't support. it does make sense as part of the bigger mosaic of what we were seeking, or should say what i was needing to find that was still trapped in our music. girl named sandoz- recorded for our first bbc session, we were led like lambs to the slaughter by a bored ex-rock star (who was assigned to us as session producer) and his chief engineer (a cockney who hated

our too-loud sound). we were mocked for asking any question, and each and every request to change a sound was met with a fake turning of the knobs; to which i yelled "do you think i'm deaf and can't hear you haven't done anything?" the upside from this charade was that in anger we played with ferocious might; one of the few documents we have in studio that captures the way we were meant to destroy music and each other by exalting in its ad infinitum power. la dolly vita- a treasure that remains from our very first recording session with butch vig in 1990, la dolly vita stands alone, unlike any song i've written since. i'd spent summers listening to woozy psychedelic music, and it must have seeped into the idealistic cortex for this to pop out so simple and fully realized. the arrangement does bear one insecurity though, where in the interest of not appearing too whimsical we tacked on the epic ending, making sure we left you somewhere out in space; far out of the orbit of planet love. spaced- bored as i was with work and looking for some diversion, this is a by-product of what happens when junk poetry meets the lost mazzy star chords along the rocky road to heaven. amen.

billy corgan february 21, 2012

Original Credits

Original album produced by Butch Vig and Billy Corgan, except "Plume" and "Starla" produced by Billy Corgan and Kerry Brown; "Soothe" produced by Billy Corgan; "Blew Away" produced by James Iha and Kerry Brown; "Landslide" produced by Ted de Bono; "Girl Named Sandoz" produced by Dale Griffin.

"Landslide" and "Girl Named Sandoz" released by arrangement with BBC Enterprises Ltd.

Re-mastered by Bob Ludwig at Gateway Mastering, Portland, Maine, 2012

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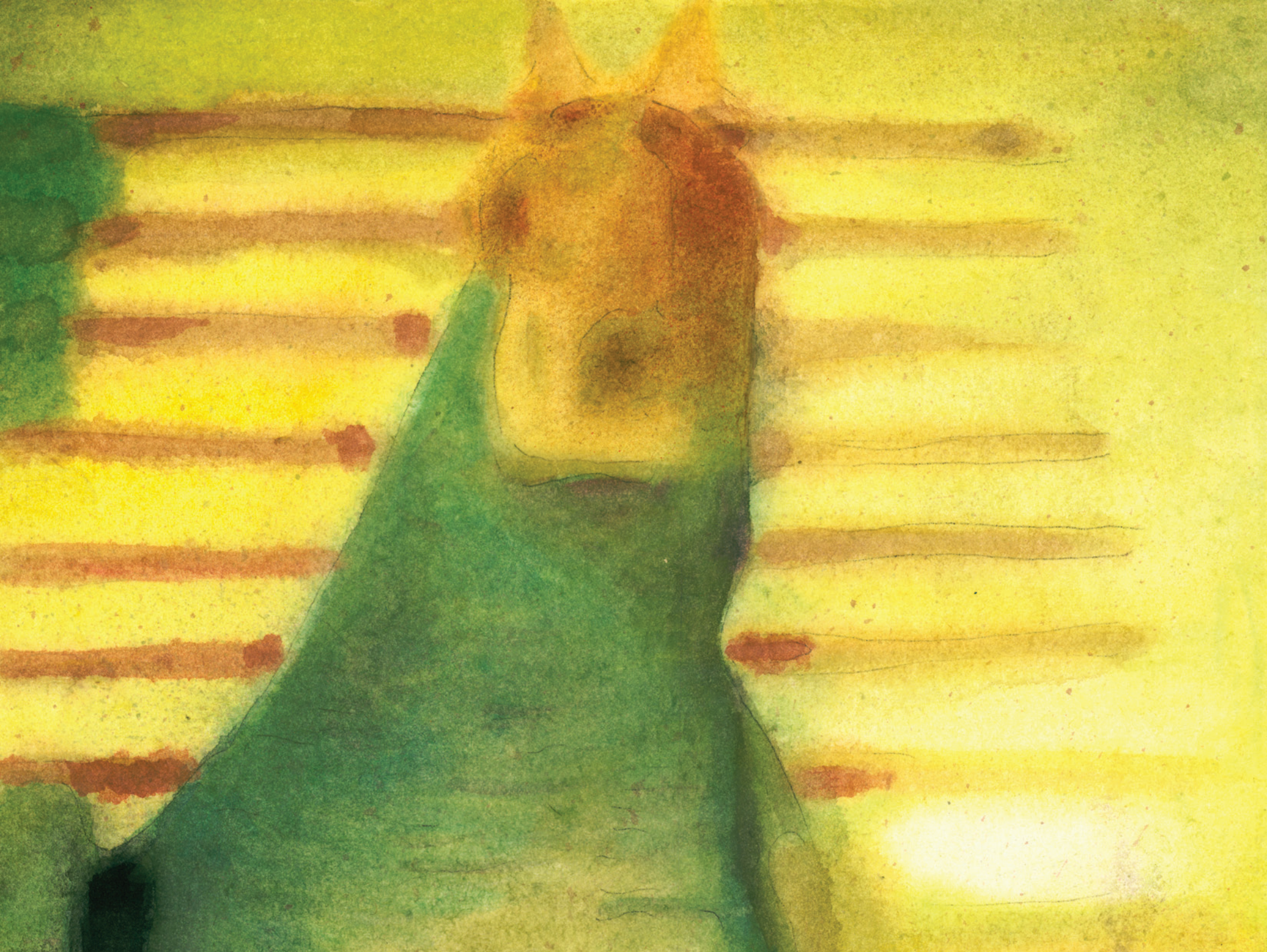
All songs written by Billy Corgan (Cinderful Music, BMI) except "There It Goes" and "Plume" written by Billy Corgan and James Iha (Cinderful Music, BMI/Cellophane Star Music, BMI), "Blew Away" written by James Iha (Cellophane Star Music, BMI), "Landslide" written by Stevie Nicks (Welsh Witch Music/Sony Songs Inc., BMI), "Girl Named Sandoz" written by Eric Burdon/John Weider (Unichappell Music, Inc., BMI), "Cinnamon Girl" written by Neil Young (Broken Arrow Music Corporation), "Jackie Blue" written by Steve Cash/Larry Lee (Irving Music, BMI), "Venus In Furs" written by Lou Reed (Oakfield Avenue Music LTD.), "The Joker" written by Steve Miller, Eddie Curtis, Ahmet Ertegun (Alfred Publishing Co., Inc.), "Dancing in the Moonlight" written by Philip Lynott (Universal Music Publishing Group)

Reissue Credits

Reissue Produced by Billy Corgan
Project Management: Bjorn Thorsrud, Rynda Laurel, Michael Murphy
Reissue Art Direction/Design: Noel Waggener
Illustrations by Satch Grimley

Legal Oversight: Jill Berliner

Original Pisces Iscariot Packaging and Photographing: Billy Corgan & Michael Meister
Original Pisces Iscariot Design Assistance: Rachel Gutek



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